27 gold miners perish in Peru

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A fire in the Esperanza 1 gold mine in the Arequipa region of southwestern Peru on May 6 killed 27 miners 80 meters below ground. The miners were employed by Servigol, a contingent labor contractor. The mine is owned by the Yanaquihua mining company. All 27 miners died from asphyxiation at midnight on May 6.

It is thought that the mine, filled with explosive gases, exploded due to an electrical spark provoked by a short circuit. Following the explosion the mine's very flammable wooden support beams caught fire, filling the gallery with smoke. The short circuit appears to have taken place near the mine's entrance. So far there is no explanation about what caused the short-circuit.

Witnessing the explosion were miners who were leaving the mine, or who had yet to enter it. The Esperanza mine is not small; it consists of nine interconnected galleries that reach down to a depth of 100 meters.

While many gold mines in Peru are illegal, often under the control of organized crime, Esperanza 1 had been approved by the local authorities and passed inspection last November. However, there is no indication that there were any emergency exits, proper ventilation systems, or that the workers possessed the necessary safety equipment. The workers had no means of communicating with the outside world. It took an hour and a half for news of the explosion to reach emergency and police personnel in the city of Arequipa.

Interviewed by the Peruvian daily *La Republica*, family members waiting to receive the dead described the working conditions of their loved ones. Elvis Sanchez, who had worked only five months in the company, would routinely complain to his family about the way he and his comrades were badly treated. Elvis had suffered an injury shortly before the explosion, but was denied adequate time to heal, according to his aunt.

Willian Cuentas Puma had also warned his family about the unsafe conditions in the electric service to the mine. "He would tell us this, just in case something bad happened," declared his cousin.

Last year, Adriel Cadena Huachaca told his family that a worker was hit by a falling rock inside the mine.

Not since the year 2000 have there been as many casualties in a single mine incident in Peru. However, the totals add up. In 2021, 63 miners died, and another 38 died in 2022. So far this year, including the 27 gold miners, there have been 32 casualties. Over the last ten years there have been 456 deaths on the job, nearly 20 percent of all job related deaths in Peru and the number of deaths continues to rise.

According to Sara Rosa Campos, an expert in Labor Relations at Peru's Catholic University, the increase in deaths and injuries is a consequence of firms, private and public, increasingly ignoring safety regulations. "Companies prioritize payments of social [insurance] benefits, instead of security and health," she said. "The latter have been pushed aside and there is not investment in the acquisition of personal protective equipment, or in safety education [of employees]."

Peru is one of the world's biggest sources of gold, silver and copper. Prices for all three commodities are rising (gold recently surpassed 2,000 US dollars/oz.), and mining corporations are generating extraordinary profits, while wages and working conditions continue to deteriorate. At the same time that stockholders, corporate managers—and government officials—enrich themselves, government oversight agencies (such as the Arequipa Energy and Mines Commission [FEMA]) face shortages of inspectors and funds. In many cases, government agencies subcontract inspectors from the private sector. Regional agencies are starved for funds.

This is not new. In 2014, a report by a government agency, La Defensoria del Pueblo, exposed the absence of personnel and sufficient budgets to inspect mines across Peru.

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In the weeks following the explosion at the Esperanza 1 mine, there has been media silence on this terrible incident. Other than an initial demand for an investigation, the Peruvian trade union federations, and the mining unions, have made no statements, let alone called for solidarity strikes by miners and other workers.

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